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ideologies can play a



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Human beings have significantly different attitudes, belief systems, and perceptions in life that collectively define their unique cultures (Sam & Berry, 2006). All efforts to understand groups or individuals should take into consideration the impact of cultural orientation.

Researchers in different disciplines have appreciated the role of cultural differences as far as drawing meaningful conclusions is concerned (Janzen, 2000). Researchers in psychology have developed a new field of study known as multicultural psychology which explores the role of cultural differences in psychological studies. This field has several concepts which include: individualism versus collectivism, bicultural conflict, acculturation, culture and aggression, gender identity, sexual identity, racial identity, ethnic identity, cultural identity, and religion. The research paper explores two major multicultural concepts, ethnic identity and acculturation. It will also discuss their significance in understanding cultural differences. There must be a comprehensive understanding of multicultural concepts if one is to fully understand cultural differences. Ethnic identity as a concept is very crucial.

It refers to the relationship that thrives between an individual and a group of people with whom the person believes share ancestral base. The group shares some unique characteristics as well as socio-cultural experiences. A person may choose to identify himself/herself with key figures like the parents or close friends, or with the social group from which one draws important values in life (Janzen, 2000). These groups may include the family or workmates. Occupational as well as ethnic groups also play a central role in ethnic identification. Ethnic groups have distinct characteristics in the

broader societal orientations which are usually characterized by varying cultures. Attempts to understand the various ethnic and cultural groups started over 2000 years ago (Sam & Berry, 2006).

Ethnic identification have been known to occur at individual, family, or group level and may be due to migrations of the entire or partial societal groupings, military dominance, or change in political boundaries.

Researchers have established various characteristics of ethnic groupings.

First, ethnic groups are commonly known to control a definite physical territory, a network of close communities, and within which cultural heritage can be perpetuated from one generation to another (Sam & Berry, 2006).

The utilization of resources may also differentiate ethnic groups who live in the same area.

Different ethnic groups can be found in the various states in America.

Second, ethnic groups can be identified by the social institutions. Various ethnicities can develop their unique social systems which control their own institutions. These social systems ensure that interactions of each group occur within the established system (Janzen, 2000). Some of the common institutions include religious, educational, and people's welfare institutions which are usually independent from external influence. The independence of ethnic institutions is normally reinforced by the territorial segregation of ethnic groups. Third, people from different ethnicities can be characterized by unique cultural heritage of their respective groups. Individuals may use language, selection of friends, schools, religious beliefs, endogamy, and various voluntary organizations to develop a clear ethnic identity (Janzen, 2000).

Ethnic groups can be distinguished by their unique territories, cultural identity and institutional factors. These factors have helped ethnic groups withstand the forces of acculturation and assimilation. Ethnic identity is also characterized by historical symbols which act as sources of pride as well as knowledge and enhances the perpetuation of unique traditions. Some of the symbols include days of obligation, eating habits, fasting, among other rituals. Fourth, ideologies can play a crucial role when it comes to ethnic identity. The ideology can be political or religious and serve to promote ethnic values. For instance, research has found that there is a significant correlation between religion and ethnicity.

Research findings by Janzen (2000) concluded that most French and Polish Canadians are Roman Catholics which imply that ethnicities can identify with specific religious convictions. Lastly, individuals may decide to employ socio-psychological approaches in perpetuating their ethnic ideologies. A given ideology is interpreted from the current perspective with symbolic linkage with the past. This is mainly done by charismatic ethnic leaders who are trusted by their respective ethnicities.

Therefore, leadership is a crucial dimension of ethnicity and can transform the relationship that exists between different ethnicities (Janzen, 2000). Civil Rights Movement in America in the 1960s is a good example of the role of charismatic ethnic or racial leaders. From the above discussion of ethnic identity, it is evident that there are several dimensions which the minorities may choose to identify with. However, identity, territory, social institutions, culture, heritage, ideological convictions, and ethnic leaders are the most important in understanding cultural differences among the people. These

dimensions make people behave differently from one another even though they may be within the same territorial boundaries. This concept, therefore, helps psychological and social researchers in having a clear multicultural understanding of the participants and hence making valid and informed conclusions. The second multicultural concept is that of acculturation.

Acculturation refers to the result of diffusion of given alien cultural traits into another society. The attitudes, belief systems, and perceptions of the receiving society are normally transformed or influenced by the foreign culture. Further studies, however, have shown that infiltration of foreign culture does not always lead to complete displacement of the receiving culture (Sam & Berry, 2006). Instead, there is usually a merger of the two cultures to produce a hybrid or a modified cultural orientation. The highly interactive world has resulted in significant cases of acculturation whose outcome has been the amalgamation of different cultures. In the United States, for instance, its people are immigrants from different corners of the world who brought with them their unique cultures (Sam & Berry, 2006). Most of them were motivated by the need to attain and practice their freedom since they were persecuted and faced oppression in their countries of origin, sought greener pastures, trade opportunities, and the need to conquer and colonize.

Others were brought to the United States as slaves and they also had to cope with the new cultures they encountered. With time, however, they sought to be free and exercise their cultures. All these people settled in different parts of North America and perpetuated their cultures. Most of them lived within the same boundaries.

The interaction of the many cultures resulted in the production of a totally new culture that uniquely identifies the United States as a result of acculturation. In most instances, the culture that is superior becomes dominant after the cultural amalgamation. Military dominance, cultural superiority, technological advancement, and the general quality of life are the most crucial factors that may enhance acculturation (Sam & Berry, 2006). Acculturation, therefore, plays a key role in understanding the cultural differences that exist among individuals who initially practiced the same culture.

When people move from one place to another, their cultural practices are significantly changed. Researchers should therefore be careful when making generalizations from their findings, particularly for a race, ethnic group, or gender related issues. Researchers have unanimously concluded that no culture has developed uninfluenced throughout its history (Sam & Berry, 2006), but all have been acculturated in one way or another.

Appreciating the power of acculturation in shaping people's cultural practices is crucial in understanding existing cultural differences. Multiculturalism, therefore, is a broad field that is essential in understanding why people behave the way they do since it takes into consideration the various concepts of multicultural studies. Among other concepts, ethnic identity and acculturation have been pointed out as the most crucial in enhancing the understanding of cultural differences, particularly by social and psychological researchers.

## **References**

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